

WEST COAST MODERN

A look at the North Shore's
home-grown, iconic and now-
endangered architectural style

BY STEVEN THRENDYLE

An architectural marvel,
Arthur Erickson referred
to Eppich House II as his
most complete design.



Left and Right: The Binning House served as a focal point for the burgeoning West Coast modern style.

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A casual perusal of real estate listings in North and West Vancouver occasionally yields cryptic clues to a bygone era. In the same way that art-deco, colonial and of course Victorian homes conjure up a specific style, certain houses are described as “mid-century modern,” “Hollingsworth neoteric” or even “Erickson originals.”

Inspired, not to mention restricted, by crashing waves, mossy outcrops and the misty rainforest canopy, British Columbia architects integrated revolutionary concepts from all over the world to create a noteworthy variation known as West Coast modern. But like the kermode bear or the woodland caribou, their numbers are endangered and dwindling.

IT ALL STARTS WITH BINNING

A balmy spring breeze lifts a bald eagle above the treetops of 2968 Mathers Crescent in West Vancouver, where a jet-black Ferrari sits parked upslope of a modest, 1,100-square-foot home that may or may not be occupied. Affixed like a tombstone at the property line, a heritage marker declares in raised bronze letters that this “daring and innovative” house is a national historic site. Designed, hand-built and occupied by artists Bertram Charles (B.C.) Binning and his wife Jessie, the Binning House wouldn’t be big enough to store two or three of the luxury cars belonging to the wealthy homeowners across the street.

It’s hard to believe that Bert and Jessie were able to purchase an acre of ocean-

view property for only \$5,000, but during the Great Depression much of West Vancouver lay under a canopy of giant fir and cedar trees. Hand-built by the Binnings back in 1941, its open-plan interior with sliding windows, full-length hallway and stunning entrance mural has set architect’s hearts a-flutter for decades.

Binning House is House Number One in the origin story of the architectural style known as West Coast mid-century modern. Despite its seemingly remote location (even now, one shudders to think of how gloomy the street might be, with the abandoned arts-and-crafts house next door teetering like a haunted mansion), Binning House came to represent high style during the ‘50s.

The importance of Binning House is greater than its innovative, stylish footprint or its entangled bushes, shrubs and trees. The couple were consummate entertainers, conducting salons with artists, designers and musicians, and



probably even a rogue or two for good measure. Austrian/American Richard Neutra, prestigious modernist, stayed there on his frequent visits to Vancouver. Binning himself was a creative force. He studied under Group of Seven artist Frederick Varley at the Vancouver School of Art and his drawing course at the University of British Columbia’s new School of Architecture would influence famous architects Ron Thom, Ned Pratt, John Porter, Arthur Erickson and Fred Hollingsworth.

HOMES FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS

In the decade following the Second World War, “modern” was synonymous with progress. “Mod” influenced art, fashion and music. But perhaps its greatest achievement was in how contemporary, futuristic thinking would dominate the world of architecture and re-shape urban life. From New York to Chicago to Toronto, gleaming office towers and

public buildings fashioned in glass, concrete and steel reached for the sky. Here in Vancouver, this brilliance in design reached its apogee in the elegantly tapered BC Electric building—now known as The Electra—at the corner of Burrard and Davie.

Shining like a beacon above hundreds of dingy bungalows laid out along English Bay, the distinctive aquamarine BC Electric building was designed by Ned Pratt and Ron Thom. These two UBC educated architects left an indelible mark not just with their commercial buildings, but in their much-celebrated West Coast mid-century modern homes.

Unlike the flat, sterile tracts of suburban land across North America where speculators and builders cranked out thousands of cookie-cutter houses, the rocky outcrops and deep forests of Vancouver’s North Shore proved both challenging and inspiring for Vancouver architects. In *Up North: Where Canadian Architect-*

ture Meets the Land, Thom explains how the rugged landscape of mountain and ocean affected home design. “The first thing we always did was look at the site,” he tells author Lisa Rochon. “We took topography into account—a building has to make love to its site.”

Prior to the 1950s, only the wealthy and well-connected could afford an architect. Hollingsworth, however, believed that pleasing, functional homes should be accessible to everyone. A new housing development called Capilano Highlands proved to be the ideal place for Hollingsworth to implement his almost Zen like principles starting with an “open-plan” concept that removed walls between kitchen, living and dining room to maximize utility in homes that were seldom larger than 2,000 square-feet. Hollingsworth admired—and was briefly taught by—the ingenious, egotistical American architect Frank Lloyd-Wright. Wright’s Usonian and Prairie Home designs ▶

were simple and elegant. Floor to ceiling windows, flat roofs with extensive overhangs and expansive, tiered decks sought to—in the words of countless brochure copywriters—“bring the outdoors in.”

West Coast modern design was celebrated in the pages of *Western Homes and Living*—a Canadian version of the highly successful *Sunset* magazine published in California—while emerging BC architects often took top honours at the Massey Awards, named after the first Canadian born Governor General.

ERICKSON: IN A CLASS BY HIMSELF Canadians with even just a passing knowledge of West Coast architecture will probably know buildings designed

facturing magnate brothers Hugo and Helmut Eppich in West Vancouver.

With its curved steel skeleton, copious glasswork, reflecting pools and four separate tiers of open-plan living, Eppich House II—located on a lofty view lot with an outstanding panorama of the city and Salish Sea—is an architectural marvel. Erickson himself called it “his most complete work.” Even the chairs, tables and fixtures were custom designed. Eppich II has just entered Vancouver’s nosebleed priced real estate market at over \$16 million. Unlike Hollingsworth’s neoterics in Edgemont Village, which are currently assessed at just over a million dollars due to their lot value, the unique architecture of Eppich House II contributes to its lofty asking price.

DESPITE ITS HERITAGE DESIGNATION, EVEN BINNING HOUSE FACES AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE



by Arthur Erickson, the incredibly talented, prolific and mercurial fellow who passed away in 2006. Erickson was an international “starchitect” known for visions in concrete fashioned at Simon Fraser University on Burnaby Mountain—which has been described as a brutalist Acropolis—and UBC’s Museum of Anthropology.

Unlike Hollingsworth, Thom and Pratt, who hewed to Frank Lloyd-Wright’s relatively simple organic style, Erickson had his wild side and his custom homes could be notably ostentatious. He was in the game early, in the 1960s, designing two small homes in the woods of West Vancouver for accomplished West Coast artist Gordon Smith. As his fame grew, so, too, did the affluence of his clients and their ambitions. Such is the case with a pair of homes built for local steel manu-

If Binning House was House Number One in the West Coast modern collection, then Eppich II might signify its endpoint. Modernism was repudiated for much of the ’80s and ’90s as new arrivals to Canada, developers, speculators and upsizing home buyers demanded multi-level monster houses that devour an entire suburban lot. Their mashed-up exteriors lapse into self-parody, with exposed wooden beams and fake Silestone pillars giving way to wrought iron Juliet balconies and perhaps a hexagonal gazebo.

NEXT MODERNS: BETTER MATERIALS, BIGGER PRICETAGS

When Kevin Vallely was attending McGill University’s School of Architecture in the mid 1980s, he was somewhat aware of “the greats” of West Coast architecture. He admits “we were defi-

nitely in this bizarre post-modernist era of excess ornamentation found on many suburban monster homes. It wasn’t until I came out here in the early ’90s that I recognized that mid-century modern is the true heritage architecture. They’re older homes and they need to be preserved, but it’s challenging to do with our building code regulations.”

In establishing his own award-winning practice, he has been able to stretch and modernize the boundaries of the elegant simplicity embodied by the 1950s masters—while at least trying to keep the costs down. “As an architect, you have to please the client and make things work from a budget standpoint. But you want to develop your own style as well.” Vallely’s homes update the West Coast values by adding energy efficiency, eco-friendly building materials and effective space utilization.

Like Arthur Erickson, whose Smith House II masterpiece connects two rock outcrops, Vallely loves the challenge of working with what nature provides. Located in Deep Cove, his stunning Cliffhanger house cantilevers outward from a granite rock face over the waters of Indian Arm. “The lot size was highly limiting; it was only 25 feet wide by 100 feet long, but there was a 60 foot drop to the waters of Indian Arm,” he says. In keeping with the West Coast modernist tradition, the home—built for a downsizing older couple—has three floors, but it’s just under 2,000 square feet in living space.

THE CHALLENGE OF HERITAGE

There’s nothing quite like the sound of a backhoe ripping through the roof of an old house. Decades of memories can be demolished in less than an hour as the claws of a bucket puncture the roof and separate posts from beams, walls from floors and stucco from windowsills.

Remodelling and restoring a mid-century modern is not like re-building a 1957 Chevrolet stored in your late uncle’s barn. In the early 1960s, Lewis Construction, a home builder responsible for hundreds of post and beam houses throughout North and West Vancouver, could build homes for ›



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A stunning interior fireplace in Erickson's Smith House II.

under \$7 per square foot, labour and materials included. In 2018, a fully-approved and up-to-code restoration of a 1,500 square-foot home might cost in the neighbourhood of \$500 per square foot, while bare lots—ones that often include mid-century “tear-downs,”—are priced over \$2 million.

In a region where real estate investment has been an object of speculation by foreign buyers, the heritage value of a home is not as important as its resale value. Homes on view lots in North and West Vancouver are routinely demolished then scraped to bare dirt and rebuilt with towering mansions three times the size of the original home. Removal of trees and native plants can change the very character of a neighbourhood. Rather than facing outward and being open to nature, these boxy, warehouse style homes are meant to maximize square footage, with seven bathrooms and five bedrooms for two people being quite common.

Despite its heritage designation, even Binning House faces an uncertain future. “What makes West Coast modernism so important is how the architects and builders paid attention to the natural state of the site,” says Adele Weder the former editor of *Canadian Architect* magazine and founder of the website *West Coast Modern League*. “In a place like the Binning House, you cannot remove the house from the site, but there are even architects who call themselves preservationists that do not see that.”

Preservationist Donald Luxton has no idea how many mid-century moderns have been torn down or radically altered. Citing their small footprint (1,600 square feet was generous, many homes were under 1,200) and somewhat flimsy building materials, many of these homes are challenging to restore without an expensive overhaul. “We have had some wins,” he says, pointing to the Toby House in West Vancouver, notable as the very first house to use glue-laminated beams to reinforce the structure. The prohibitive cost of land (currently in the neighbourhood of \$2 million) has effectively shut out the middle class who might have been able to afford these homes at one time. ▶



ASIDE FROM A FEW CLASSIC homes purchased by preservationists with the deep pockets needed to complete an historically accurate renovation, West Coast modernism will fade away. Ironically, many tenets of the style, such as ruthless space efficiency and extensive use of glass and organic materials have been adopted by architects and builders in the nascent Tiny Homes movement.

Perhaps land will always hold more monetary value than the homes we build upon it, but there are many things in life worth more than money. While many mid-century modern homes are being lost to the developer's bulldozer others remain preserved, clinging to the wind-swept cliffsides and hidden under the rainforest canopy where they belong. 🌲

Erickson's Eppich House II is an architectural marvel to this day.

FIND OUT MORE

The Modern Architecture of North Vancouver, 1930-1965: The Heritage Inventory of the District of North Vancouver by Donald Luxton features sketches and descriptions (and addresses!) for dozens of institutional and residential buildings. It's available for sale at the District of North Vancouver office on West Queens Road. A similar inventory done for West Vancouver is, sadly, out of print.

The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1930-1963 by Rhodri Windsor-Liscombe reads like an architect student's textbook and covers institutional and commercial spaces like the Arthur Erickson's famed Robson Street Law Courts and the Simon Fraser University campus. There's even a sketch for a futuristic "Third Crossing" of Burrard Inlet near Stanley Park.

The West Coast Modern House (Bellerby et al) details dozens of '50s-era mid-century moderns, most of which have been demolished. Includes a brief section on Next Modern homes, featuring up and coming architects like BattersbyHowat and CamposLeckie.

Design for Living: West Coast

Modern Homes Revisited (West Vancouver Art Museum) is a collection of essays, with each chapter featuring a case study of mid-century modern homes that have been successfully updated and restored.

Coast Modern: Three Generations of Inspired Living, a stellar documentary directed by Mike Bernard and Gavin Froome. A deluxe two-DVD set can be purchased from coastmodernfilm.com or streamed on *The Knowledge Network*.

If you don't want to be a Peeping Tom, then sign up for the annual ***West Coast Modern Home Tour***. Each July, four of the North Shore's most revered, if not eclectic, homes are open to the public for one day. There's a self-drive option but splurging on the guided bus tour really provides the inside scoop.

Finally, all three of the North Shore's pre-eminent galleries and museums celebrate mid-century modern style.

The Polygon Gallery near Lonsdale Quay, the **West Vancouver Art Museum** (680 17th Street) and the **Gordon Smith Gallery of Canadian Art** (2121 Lonsdale) are all worth visiting.

